

Evaluation of the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship Program

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This report details the administrative process and outcomes for the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) program and recipients at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, funded by the Estate of William F. Vilas. The report is presented to the Vilas Trustees and the Office of the Provost in three sections¹:

Section I: Administrative Details

Section II: Experiences and Outcomes of VLCP Recipients

Section III: Scholarship Progress and Highlights

Section I: Administrative Details

The 2022/23 academic year marks the 18th year of Vilas Life Cycle Professorships at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) program is administered by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Inclusion in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute (WISELI), as authorized by the Office of the Provost. The Vilas Trustees awarded \$737,900 for the program in 2022/23. \$318,498 was carried over from 2021/22, leaving \$419,402 in new funding for this year.

All faculty and permanent principal investigators, regardless of divisional affiliation, are eligible for these funds. Per the stipulations of the Estate, individual awards are not to exceed \$40,000. In addition, all awardees are vetted with the Office of the Provost prior to establishing an award in order to ensure that each recipient is in good standing with the University.

In 2022/23, a new policy was established to only make awards in the current fiscal year; no pre-spending on the 2023/24 allocation was allowed. Thus, all awards made in this round will end on June 30, 2023.

Review Panel

WISELI has enlisted the following faculty/staff to read applications and make funding decisions:

- **Jennifer Sheridan.** A Senior Scientist, Permanent PI, and a sociologist by training, Dr. Sheridan represents the Social Sciences Division. Dr. Sheridan has administered the original Life Cycle Research Grant (LCRG) program since its inception in 2002, as well as serving on the VLCP panel since the Vilas Trust began funding the awards in 2005.
- **Amy Wendt.** A professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Dr. Wendt represents the Physical Sciences Division. Dr. Wendt has served on the review panel of the former LCRG program since its inception. She currently serves as the Associate Vice Chancellor for Research in the OVCERGE.

¹ To maintain anonymity of the recipients, the public will have access to Sections I and II only.

- **Thomas DuBois.** Dr. DuBois is professor and chair of the German, Nordic, and Slavic department, and represents the Arts & Humanities Division.
- **Nicole Perna.** Dr. Perna is a Professor of Genetics, and represents the Biological Sciences Division.

Applicants and Awards

We have established multiple deadlines for Life Cycle applications throughout the year, in order to increase the flexibility of the program for faculty in crisis. In 2022/23, we offered three rounds of funding.

- **Round 1.** Deadline May 27, 2022. Applications received: 8. Total amount requested: \$283,951. Applications funded: 4. Total amount awarded: \$102,043.
- **Round 2.** Deadline September 30, 2022; extended to October 14, 2022. Applications received: 9. Total amount requested: \$311,622. Applications funded: 7. Total amount awarded: \$248,095.
- **Round 3.** Deadline December 30, 2022. Applications received: 10. Total amount requested: \$307,700. Applications funded: 3. Total amount awarded: \$69,264.

- **SUMMARY, 2022/23:** Applications received: 27. Total amount requested: \$903,273. Applications funded: 14. Total amount awarded: \$737,900 (\$318,498 are fulfilling 2021/22 awards; \$419,402 in new awards for 2022/23).

Recipient Demographics

Demographically, Vilas Life Cycle Professorship applicants are very diverse (27 unique applicants in 2022/23):

	Applicants	Recipients
Gender		
Female	19	10
Male	8	4
Race/Ethnicity²		
Faculty of Color	8	2
Majority Faculty	19	12
Title		
Assistant Professor	10	6
Associate Professor	6	4
Professor	10	4
Permanent PI/Academic Staff*	1	0

² Faculty of Color are those whose “ethnic group code” is listed as Black, Asian, American Indian, Hispanic, or “2 or more races” in University records. Majority Faculty are listed as “White” or have missing data on the race indicator.

Division		
Biological Sciences	6	1
Physical Sciences	8	5
Social Sciences	7	5
Arts & Humanities	6	3

* Approximately 50 academic staff members have Permanent PI status. A divisional affiliation would be assigned to them based on their research and administrative home (e.g., a Permanent PI in the SMPH is assigned the “Biological Sciences” division.)

Issues Arising in 2022/23

Due to the inability to make awards that span a fiscal year boundary, many of the very deserving applications we received in the December round were not awarded. We have encouraged those applicants to re-apply in the May 2023 round.

Section II: Experiences and Outcomes of VLCP Recipients

The reasons that individuals apply for the Vilas Life Cycle Professorship (VLCP) grants are varied and idiosyncratic to their situations. What is common however, is that they experience multiple crises that occur at a critical juncture in their careers. Their decisions to apply are often guided by the need to get through the crises without significant impact to their professional careers. With this round of grantees, the COVID pandemic exacerbated many of their personal situations. Most of the grantees found themselves doing extensive caretaking for multiple family members—their spouses, children, siblings, and/or parents. They had pre-term babies or toddlers, and multiple sick and elderly family members, many of whom passed away. A few had major catastrophes in their homes, and some were affected by strokes, cancer, or other debilitating issues. In all cases, this funding mechanism relieved some of their burden. Fifteen grantees responded to a request for information in the form of a survey. Their responses, experiences and outcomes are provided below.

Grantee Retention

A little over half of the grantees indicated they were at risk for leaving UW-Madison and were able to stay due to the funds. Some were offered positions from other universities that they turned down due to this grant. Others noted that they were not thinking of leaving during the crisis, but now that they are beyond it, they are more likely to stay due to feeling cared for by the UW. A few were able to be tenured or promoted to full professors. Their comments included:

Since I am an assistant professor on the tenure track, the life event affected my productivity and therefore may have jeopardized whether I would be able to stay at UW-Madison. The VLCP grant greatly helped put my research on the right track.

The life events very much put me at risk of leaving UW-Madison. I actually was offered a tenured associate professor job at [University name] this winter that I turned down. Two of the primary reasons why I turned down the job offer were due to the life-cycle grant. First, I had remaining flexible funds that I did not use because of the life-cycle grant, which made [University name]

research funds less compelling. Second, the degree of support that I felt from UW-Madison when going through what I went through in my personal life will forever make me see UW-Madison differently as an institution that deeply cares about faculty members' lives.

While I don't think that I was at immediate risk of leaving UW-Madison, the funding made a difference in career progression which makes it more likely that I will stay at UW-Madison.

There was a short-term high risk, but I don't think this risk was changed by the funds. There was also a longer-term risk, because I would not have enjoyed my position if my lab had not been able to continue doing research. I can imagine I would have been tempted to leave rather than attempt to build up completely from zero. This risk was changed by the VLCP funds because they gave me the ability to recruit a new postdoc, and even before he arrived, I was more secure in the vision for the future of the lab.

Support For and Retention of Others

In recent years and especially during the pandemic, supporting and retaining others was a significant and positive outcome of this award for the VLCP recipients. For every grantee, one to three additional people were funded and provided a position that led to further outcomes—awarded grants, publications, and job offers, as examples. These individuals included undergraduate students, lab managers and other staff positions, graduate students, and postdoctoral scientists. They provided both the “hands” and the “heads” to do the work that the grantees were unable to do. They helped to manage labs, collect and analyze data, write grants and publications, and essentially, move the awardees' scholarship and research along to the next stage. Without these individuals, the grantees' career progression would slow down or most likely, stop. And even more importantly, many of these individuals would have lost their jobs during the crisis of the awardees, as well as due to the pandemic. The VLCP recipients explain this:

Having an experienced Project Assistant enabled me to respond to new research areas that emerged as a result of the pandemic crisis. Being this nimble was important in order to collect data in the moments of crisis... If we had waited to secure funding for [research topic], we might not have received funding and it would have been too far past the height of the pandemic to capture the [data]. Having a PA also helped me take a leadership role and gather researchers in 6 other countries to do similar [data collection].

Research progress would have been slowed down. The graduate student supported by this funding would have been put on TA. Also, the bandwidth that he and I had to then bring on a talented undergrad (who led one of the publications in preparation) would have been reduced.

This program was extremely valuable to me. I was able to provide additional support for my laboratory, particularly when I was unable to commit as much time as I normally would. I felt supported by the university to continue my work.

Psychological Support

Many of the awardees described the psychological boost that this funding provided to them. Trying to manage the crises while maintaining their jobs and career progression took an extensive toll on their emotional and mental health. Not only did this award support them, it also supported those who worked with them. Many described this support:

Reading the stories shared by others who received this funding helped me find peace during my crisis. Knowing that many others in my position had also endured incredible personal challenges was an immense source of comfort. Learning about the challenges others faced also helped me stop blaming myself for all the bad things that had occurred, which were out of my control. I had somehow internalized that there must be something wrong with me because I was the only person I knew going through these struggles. This program made me aware that I wasn't alone and that many others had experienced serious life events as well.

I think psychologically the funds helped me to feel seen and valued in an important way. They also helped me feel like it was ok to spend the time caring for family when I needed to. I don't regret any minute I spent with my Dad as he was sick and ultimately dying. And I'm sure I wouldn't no matter what. But the funds helped me to feel like I wasn't facing a trade off in the way I might have without them.

While less tangible, having this funding mechanism is a psychological boost – it provides legitimacy to having occasional struggles that need extra support. As described in #1, I did need the support, but may not have recognized that what I was going through was a challenge that the University wanted to see me through without this mechanism.

The Life Cycle funds greatly alleviated stress and improved the morale of the entire lab.

Gratitude and Commitment to the UW

This group of awardees were especially vocal in their gratitude and feelings of loyalty to the UW due to this grant. They described the positive feelings that the awarding of this grant gave to them at the lowest point in their lives. Receiving it confirmed their commitment to staying at the UW. Further, they shared this with others in their department and even potential hires. The VLCP award, to them, was symbolic of the care that the UW has towards its faculty and staff. These feelings are shared below:

The funds represented a direct acknowledgement that the University wanted me to succeed professionally and that I was valued enough to be worthy of financial assistance in maintaining my research program.

I have told others (though most already know!). It is, without question, valued highly and seen as something unique and important that the UW does to recognize scholars as whole people (and to recognize the challenges to research when we are dealing with not just the physically tangible

but also the emotional consequences of our own health challenges or the burdens of care provision for ailing family.

I feel the UW - Madison is an empowering and supportive institution. The fact that the UW supports our faculty's research member in times of need.

When I talk with perspective tenure track faculty during hiring processes, I mention the Vilas Life Cycle grant as an example of the range of support for research that is available at UW-Madison. I say that it is reassuring to know that the UW has resources to support research at all different career stages and for different needs.

Award Perceptions and Academic Culture

Although none of the recipients specifically identified negative outcomes from receiving the award, a couple shared that they appreciated the confidentiality of it. They did not want their colleagues to think less of them due to their personal crises. To do so, would go against the perceived strength that they were supposed to show as a faculty member. One VLCP recipient describes this:

Certainly, I would not have felt comfortable sharing the combination of life events with others in my department because I wouldn't want to be seen as a "complainer" or "whiner." To this day, I have never told anyone in my department about all the adverse life events I experienced during the 2-year period that led me to apply for this program because having a façade of invincibility is so critical to maintaining the appearance of being talented and successful, particularly for young women of color whose role in the University as tenure track faculty is always open to scrutiny.

Others noted their fear in how others perceive it, including department chairs and others in senior leadership:

I don't believe I've ever had to explain it to someone unfamiliar with it. I am not fully certain how my colleagues view it. Still, I think there is an important "symbolic power" associated with it that signals to my colleagues that I have non-work-related challenges. Hopefully, they take that into account when making personnel decisions.

It sends a very important message to department chairs and other colleagues that UW understands major life events happen, and that we support our faculty and want them to continue to do their best work during and/or after such events rather than risk losing them. I see the VLCP as both the right thing to do from a macro-life/work balance perspective and also as a very important retention tool, although here it might be retention in academia as opposed to retention at UW per se that is at stake.

I think my departmental peers perceive the Life Cycle program favorably.

Unfortunately, the senior leadership and administrators in my department do not consider intramural awards (such as the Life Cycle grant) to be “real” grants. Life Cycle grants do not count as progress in annual performance reviews in my department.

Some noted the effects of a culture that does not acknowledge humanity of faculty and staff:

Also, the overall university culture needs to change. There remain vestiges of an attitude that dismisses the importance of work/life balance and stigmatizes asking for help. The Life Cycle grant and other mechanisms (clock extensions, gap funding, etc.) should be acknowledged, respected, and valued more highly in performance reviews.

I would have requested bridge funding from our department, which is an awkward process that would have led to personal questions regarding why I had reduced research productivity that I would not have felt comfortable sharing. Also, I may not have been able to get bridge funding approved in a sufficiently timely fashion to avert the staff layoff notices and a bridge funding request could have created conflicts with my faculty colleagues (or would have at least lowered their opinion of me to being a “struggling” or “weak” junior faculty member), thus potentially impeding my promotion.

Yes, I have told others about this grant as being thrown a critical “lifeline” during crisis. I think it is perceived as an invaluable program in our department and across campus to help address and acknowledge the needs of faculty as human beings who will, from time to time, experience major challenges in their lives that have the potential derail their entire career.

Award Purpose and Management

All of the awardees noted the need for this type of award that takes into account issues at work. For the few who thought that work-related issues should not be a part of this program, they did concede that they should be taken into account when they occur in combination with personal crises. Some of the work-related examples included:

Our work environments can be very intense and stressful. Navigating difficult relationships with others regularly takes a lot of time and energy away from scholarly activity. Add to that an adverse event, and I see why that could be a major obstacle to productivity. Depending on the character of such an event (imagining something serious like harassment, bullying, or discrimination), I would hope the VLP application process could steer an applicant to additional support beyond what is needed for research support.

Yes, I see the benefit of broader criteria that include workplace events. The crux of the issue is that the faculty member has encountered an adverse, unavoidable event that blocks progress, regardless of the domain (i.e., personal life vs. work) in which the ‘roadblock’ occurs.

Nevertheless, it might be beneficial to have separately titled award mechanisms for life events vs. workplace events, so that everyone is not competing in the same pool. Furthermore, I've encountered some who are more sympathetic about workplace adversity (adverse personal life events are "your own problem" while workplace setbacks are "understandable"). Having a distinct grant for adverse life events combats this bias by naming the issue and validating the act of requesting help in times of personal hardship.

The VCLP program should meet with the University Committee on Disability Access and Inclusion to understand disability as a major life event that impedes scholarly achievement. The University Committee on Disability Access and Inclusion Cana advise on how to adjust the program requirements for temporary and permanent disabilities.

There are few mechanisms to acknowledge and support the time away from research that is a direct result of dealing with crises at work. Defining relevant 'at work events' might be a challenge, as many senior researchers seem to be expected to put their research on hold or lower in priority in order to take on administrative duties.

Finally, as in previous years, Dr. Sheridan was identified as the person who has managed this award professionally and competently. Comments about her and the overall administration of the grant included:

The grant application, notification, and administration process were very smooth. Jennifer Sheridan was highly empathetic and helpful in guiding me through applying even though I was initially apprehensive that my problems (and who I was as an individual) were not "significant" enough to be worthy of funding. I was also worried that the personal information I shared would become known to others in my department. Finally, the experience of having to write down and confront the substantial challenges I was experiencing was very humbling and helped me to process trauma that I had internalized and was afraid to share with others. My overall experience with the grant application process was that it was highly cathartic, and I am incredibly grateful for this support that has enabled my career to flourish here at UW.

The application was straightforward and relatively seamless. I appreciated the confidentiality. Notification was also easy as was administration.

Amazing. Thank you!

Continue to support the Life Cycle program!

Scholarship Outcomes and Productivity

In the next section, Section III, the awardees provided details about the scholarship that they were able to complete because of the award. A few provided description about these outcomes:

These funds really did serve as seed money – with the award notification we were able to interview for the position which generated enthusiasm, we wrote a couple of papers in the area and even before publication presented these at meetings which enhanced visibility for the lab, the new results and the new postdoc were part of the environment that then made the lab a more attractive option for new students, and four of these have joined the lab in the past year. So the funds had an outsized impact in nucleating the current vibrant laboratory situation. All of this might sound generic and not related to the precipitating event, but in fact we had lost out on extramural funding to play this role during the half year or so that my time to focus on lab research and personnel was severely curtailed.

The funding assisted to complete research with colleagues in the field and travel to complete research. I was able to fund the multiple projects and feel secure and supported by the university during the recovery and healing.

I put this program near the top, particularly for a research-intensive institution such as UW-Madison. I believe that investment in Life Cycle grants pays off many-fold in terms of extramural funding, higher-level papers, faculty retention, completion of Ph.D.'s, etc.

Section III: Research, Scholarship and Productivity

This final section describes the recipients' research and the scholarship that they directly attribute to the time and funds of their VLCP award. It has been removed for confidentiality reasons.